

10/1-31/65

**DORE ASHTON**

**ROMARE BEARDEN  
PROJECTIONS**

**QUADRUN**





Dore Ashton



*Mysteries.*

ROMARE BEARDEN

# PROJECTIONS



Romare Bearden chooses his terms cautiously, never overtaxing the function of his images. He wryly observes that to change the world you might need something more than a painting. His new suite of photomontages, *Projections*, is, he says, "the consolidation of some memories, of some direct experiences from my childhood to the present."

But that is a characteristic understatement, for these memories and experiences emerge in a form that is more commanding than mere reminiscence. Circumstance is all-important: these harrowing images have surged into Bearden's consciousness with enough force to displace, temporarily, his usual preoccupation with abstract lyrical painting. They arrived at a particular moment in American history and cannot be seen—at least not for the moment—as divorced from the crisis. They are direct responses to the groundswell of awareness that brought white Americans finally into a confrontation with their crimes. They are, as Bearden himself acknowledges, "about something outside of just the structure of the works."

The mordant technique of photomontage answered a need. Bearden cites Braque's "you can't do everything the same way" to explain his departure from abstract painting, and adds that his photomontages are "very pure plastically." They are, in fact, strongly structured, plastically sound compositions, but they go beyond elementary design problems. Necessity was their source just as the photomontage technique itself derived from a specific necessity.

Although Bearden sees his projections in the cubist tradition, his images relate as much to the activist photomontages that gained currency during the First World War. It is quite possible, writes Peter Selz in an article on John Heartfield, that the photomontage principle was discovered by soldiers on the Western Front who, "unable to get their reports of butchery past the censors, turned to pasting together photographs and cutouts from illustrated papers to tell their tale of horror to their families and friends". From these graphic accounts such artists as John Heartfield and George Grosz (who was Bearden's teacher years later) derived a medium which they turned into a vigorous protestant tool.

In his own terms, Bearden has done no less. His tale of horror, drawn from his own history, is told in the inescapably plain terms of the photograph—the eye-witness whose testimony cannot be shaken. Even though Bearden has scissored and pasted with the skill of a long-standing, powerful graphic artist, and even though he alludes constantly to Art, or the history of art, Bearden ultimately arrives at a piercing, activist bill of particulars of intolerable facts.

As a background to the works, Bearden's lean autobiography gives only a few essential clues: "I was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, on Sept. 2, 1914. I went to public school and high school in New York City and Pittsburgh... After I graduated from New York University I went to the Art Students' League and studied with the great German artist George Grosz... I got a studio. Mine was over that of Jacob Lawrence's at 33 West 125th Street...". 125th Street: The main thoroughfare of New York City's ghetto Harlem—site of overwhelming squalor and despair. As an indication of how remote and confined ghetto life is, Bearden's next few lines in his autobiography are revealing. He explains how his education was supplemented when a friend of his took him "downtown" where he met such artists as Paul Burlin and





*Prevalence of Ritual: Baptism.*





*Evening, 9 : 10, Lennox Avenue.*

►  
*Prevalence of Ritual:  
Conjur Woman as an Angel.*







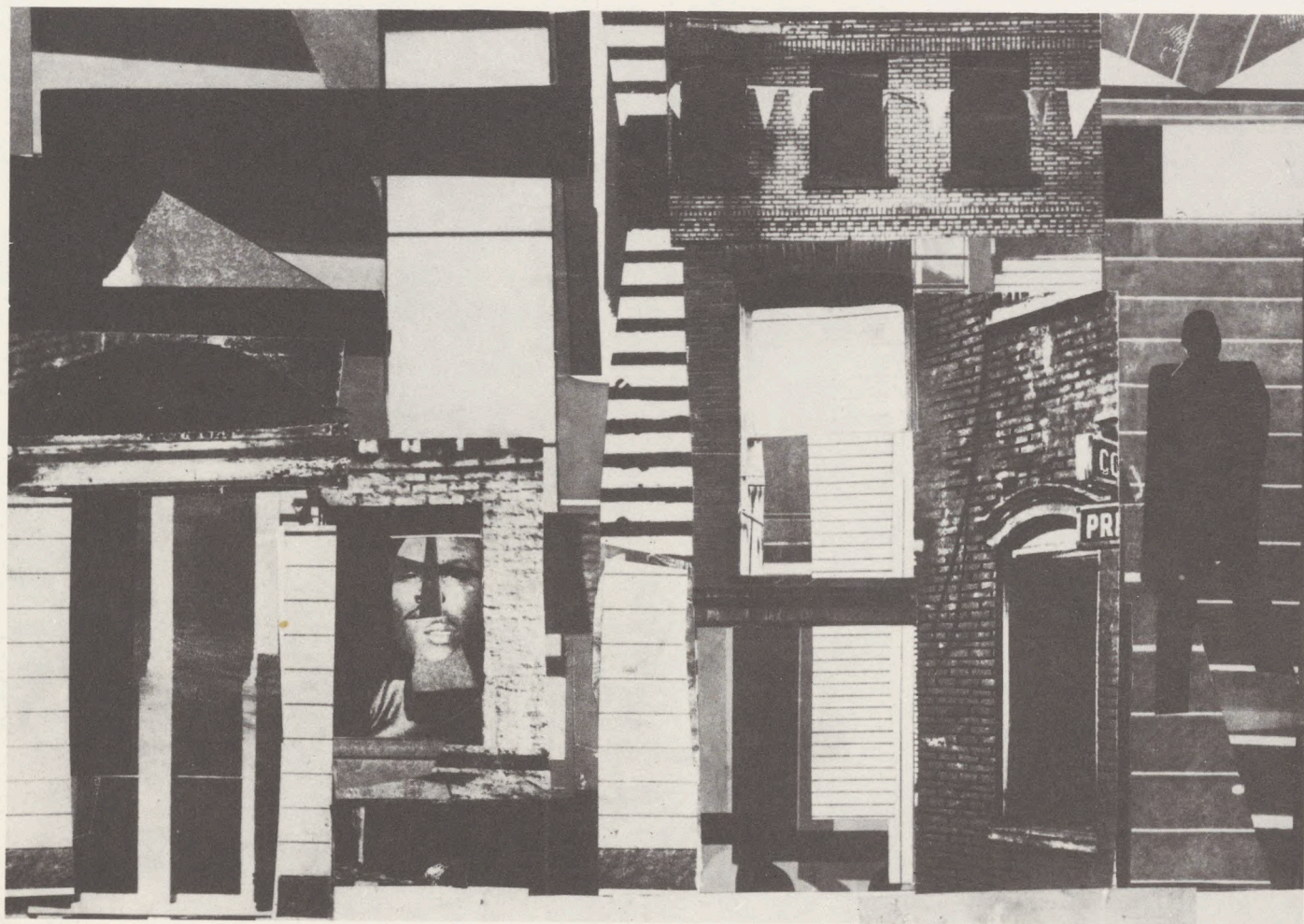


*The Dove.*









*Spring Way.*

►  
*Prevalence of Ritual:  
 Conjur Woman.*









*Pittsburgh Memory*



Stuart Davis. "Downtown" where the white artist seeks his destiny is very different from uptown, from Bearden's studio over the Apollo Theatre on 125th Street. In another context Bearden has written that as a Negro, "I do not need to go looking for 'happenings', the absurd, or the surreal, because I have seen things that neither Dali, Becket, Ionesco or any of the others could have thought possible."

What Bearden had seen from youth on did not recede—not while he was in the United States Army, not while he was working in Paris, not while he was developing a distinctive abstract idiom, not while he was, for a time, a professional song writer. It was there, waiting for the appropriate moment and means, and emerged in time to become one of the strongest statements in an art form of the central scandal of America.

Bearden in his photomontages takes us into many climates, many places—some literally described, some allegorically indicated in allusions to Art. Yet even when he introduces an almost-familiar figure from a Renaissance painting, as he does at the extreme right of "Mysteries", or in the Velasquez-like group in "Evening, 9:10, 461 Lenox Avenue", the image functions as more than an esthetic quotation. For each of Bearden's compositions is dominated by the eyes of real people, eyes that look out at the spectator with relentless steadiness, eyes that can only be seen as accusing.

Bearden doesn't depend, as would the surrealist, on startling juxtaposition. Rather, he focuses on significant details from which the nature of his experiences can be constructed by the beholder. Of his early memories, there are compositions alluding unmistakably to the South. Quite aside from the fact that they would naturally fall into the past (he was born in 1914, after all), these Southern images have a quality of ancientness. They are at once quiet and disquieting. They recall African customs and colonial vices.

In "Prevalence of Ritual, Tidings" for instance, the ancient train is moving through a pale, stripped landscape haunted by birds, while the specific place is indicated by the clapboard house. The black angel bearing tidings is, like most of Bearden's creatures, masked, and only the large eye is animate.

The pendant composition, "Conjur Woman" carries an interesting commentary by the artist: "Only the conjur woman, alone in the woods, seems unaffected by her solitude; therefore no train defaces her woods. A conjur woman, they say, can change reality, but for the rest of us, it is too late. The World is without her kind of mystery now."

Yet the mystery, coupled with ineffable despair, does extend itself into Bearden's images of urban life. One of the strongest pictures in the series, "Pittsburgh Memory" deliberately invokes African associations. The two workers, frontally seen in closeup, are like participants in a sober ritual. Their faces are given as masks and the displacement of feature is not distortion, but rather, abstraction of the essential feelings involved.

This curious effect, by the way, runs consistently throughout the series. Any individual face when examined closely is basically distorted, with features of varying types and ages brought together in one startling visage. Yet the total effect is not one of deformity—not the exacerbated dislocations of Bacon, or the disfigurements of Richier. Rather, Bearden's compendia of features can be read as the multiple profiled heads in Picasso's paintings can be read: as



vital descriptions of salient characteristics. They are not expressionist at all in tenor, but rather sadly analytical.

In the sweep of Bearden's life several epochs are commemorated. His views of jazz, for instance, are the views of the 1930s when jazz was "hot" and not "cool" and when jazzmen grinned and were transported wildly, rather than introspectively and deadpanned as they are today.

Bearden's metropolitan ghetto is today's ghetto however, its bricks and pavements closely figured, its denizens exasperated and sullen. In "The Dove" Bearden gives much of his message in the ballet of hand gestures—from a raised fist to the folded hands of resignation. In others pertaining to urban misery, childrens' faces often serve as the dread counterpoint for Bearden's accretions of telling detail. Inescapably the "real" speaks.

Although Bearden's stress is insistently on art, it is in the artlessness of the "real" that the power of these photomontages lies. The times and places he depicts are unmistakeable, no matter how much regulated by his plastic manipulations. In this sense, Bearden's photomontages may be compared with the best film documentaries which, through their uncompromising severity, their strict adherence to visual fact, transcend reportage and become art. Depth of feeling and discipline are the keys.

#### BIOGRAPHY

*Romare Bearden was born in Charlotte (North Carolina, U.S.A.) in 1914. After going to public and high schools, he went to New York University. After graduating, he went to the Art Student's League and studied with George Grosz who introduced him to the draftsmen of the past. He got himself a studio in Harlem where he met the novelists Claude McKay and William Attaway who both gave him another kind of education. R. Bearden began a series of works on Negro life. During the war, he was in the Army. After the war, he had a showing of his works at the "G" Gallery in Washington. In 1945, he showed at Kootz "The Passion of Christ". In 1948, he showed at the Niveau Gallery. In 1950, Bearden went to Paris where he met many American painters and among the French, Brancusi, Hélion and Reichel. When he went back to the States, he got interested in music and wrote some songs. In 1960 and 61 and 64, he exhibited at the Michel Warren Gallery and at Cordier and Ekstrom. Bearden has also taken part in numerous group shows in major Museums in the U.S.A., South America and Europe.*



